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ABSTRACT

As a recent curriculum innovation replacing Freshman English, the Freshman Investigative Seminar consists of 12 or 13 students meeting for one semester of five weekly class hours, directed by faculty from different disciplines. Its objectives are to lead the student to learn how to gather information from various sources, how to keep accurate records of research and reading, and how to write a clear report on a specific topic chosen from research findings. This course first developed from dissatisfaction with the traditional Freshman English course and focused on the subject of the American Indian. Following this general theme throughout the course, students ultimately gained greater appreciation of and insight into both the complex culture of the American Indian and the moral issues involved in confrontations between Indians and the white society. (JM)

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THE AMERICAN INDIAN:

A FRESHMAN INVESTIGATIVE SEMINAR

by

Christopher E. Fullman

Upsala College

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This course grew out of discussions with students and colleagues about the activities of Indian militants at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, and at the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Washington, D. C.

Our discussions made us realize how little we knew about the American Indians and how insensitive we were to the most sinned against of all Americans, the American Indian.

CS 201 284

When I was asked to serve as a leader of a Freshman Investigative Seminar at Upsala College, I had no hesitation about the topic. It would be: The American Indian.

But first a few words about the idea of a Freshman Investigative Seminar -- or F.I.S. The F.I.S. is a recent innovation in the curriculum at Upsala. It grew out of dissatisfaction with the traditional Freshman English course and aimed to provide a quite different emphasis, namely: a course devoted to learning how to learn. In the F.I.S. the students, 12 - 13 in number, work in conjunction with a professor and a designated library staff person. The objectives include:

1. learning how a professional goes about gathering information on a given subject;

2. learning how to keep accurate records of one's research and reading;

3. learning how to define one's focus and write an accurate report on the topic selected fro detailed exploration.

The F.I.S. courses are limited to one semester of five hours class-and-library-instruction per week. They are directed by faculty from various disciplines. Recent F.I.S. studies have included the following: Utopian societies directed by a professor of history; Freud's dream theories led by a professor of ~~sociology~~ psychology; the South Pacific led by a professor of chemistry; the Idea of Upsala College conducted by an associate dean, etc. The students select the particular seminar they are interested in from a list provided during pre-registration and in most cases can be accommodated in the ~~one~~ course of their first choice.

Individual instructors are encouraged to use as much originality and innovation in their conduct of the seminars as they wish as long as they fulfill the general guidelines of the F.I.S. program -- viz. learning how to learn, learning how to keep accurate records of research, and learning how to write clear and accurate reports of the subject being investigated.

Let's examine these objectives more closely.

First, learning how to learn. This involves close teamwork between the seminar leader, the students and the librarians. It includes a thorough introduction to the library -- catalogue, periodicals, indices, microfilm, inter-library loan, etc., etc. It also includes imaginative exploration of other sources from the Yellow Pages of the

phone book to the use of government agencies, municipal records, historical society archives, film libraries, interviews ... wherever information can be found.

The student, like the seminar leader, learns by doing. In my particular seminar we divided up into teams to find potential sources of information. Some concentrated on the catalogue; others on special indices, others on government publications. When we had a fair idea of the resources of our college library, we fanned out to other libraries, museums, government agencies and the like. We made field trips to the Museum of the American Indian in New York and had an archeologist working on an Indian dig in New Jersey lecture us on the learning methodology involved in that discipline. (In the latter instance one got a very tangible sense of the Ancient Indian presence

when the archeologist passed around to us a large, flawlessly-shaped spear-point about 7 inches long and weighing about half a pound. He pointed out that this particular weapon, though excavated in New Jersey, was made from a type of rock found in the far West AND dated from approximately 3000 B.C. -- a lesson in time-depth to all of us.)

By the end of the third week of the semester we had gathered some rather encouraging bibliography on various aspects of the American Indian -- his history, his religion, his arts and crafts, his tools and weapons, his sports, his modes of dress and housing, etc.

In the meantime we had begun some writing. From our discussions we worked out some plans for short essays,

warm-up exercises for the major investigative report of the semester. These short essays involved varying degrees of documentation from very slight to moderate. The topics included:

1. Personal Impressions of the American Indian drawn from films or T.V.

2. An Important Indian Leader or Chief

3. Some specific event involving Indians vs Whites in American history.

The students submitted their essays on a rexograph stencils so that each member of the seminar would receive a copy of his fellow students' work.

The point here was three-fold. First, I wanted to get the students started on some writing; second, I wanted to form some idea of their writing skills and deficiencies;

and, finally and most importantly, I wanted to give the students the opportunity to edit and criticize the papers of their peers.

The procedure was essentially that of an editorial round-table. Each student had the responsibility of editing each essay and of writing a brief critique touching on clarity of point, organization, and, where appropriate, accuracy in the use of sources.

This proved to be a productive technique -- sometimes painful and halting but at other times lively and enjoyable. As the students overcame their shyness and superficiality we had more successful sessions. I made it a policy to deal privately with the grammar problems of weaker or poorly-prepared students and tried to concentrate in the editorial

sessions on clarity of thought and logical organization of material.

No grades were assigned to any papers since we had established from the outset that growth in writing skills and performance on the major investigative essay would be the principal criteria for evaluating the students' work.

Each student had the further obligation of doing a thorough re-write of each of the preliminary essays. I arranged individual conferences for review of these revised versions to determine the extent to which the students were profiting from our editorial discussions.

Meanwhile we were continuing our exploration of the American Indian through reading, seeing documentary films

(several on loan from a municipal library), listening to cassette materials dealing with contemporary Indian problems, etc. To get a panoramic idea of the history of the American Indian we divided the subject into periods (eg. pre-Columbian; the Spanish influence in the South West; the English and the East Coast; the French and the Mississippi Valley, etc.) and assigned teams of three students to each period for the purpose of class reports.

At the mid-point in the semester we were beginning to be sufficiently knowledgeable about the American Indians to begin choosing more specific areas of concentrated research.

Now we were ready for the most important task of the semester: the long (20-25 page) documented essay. I encouraged the students to select a topic of maximum interest and to begin at once to prepare bibliographies. I also set up conference dates for individual consultation.

We set aside two of our class hours for individual conferences and field work.

Among the topics submitted were the following:

1. The Sun Dance Religion
2. Ceramic Design in the South West
3. Indian Tools and Weapons
4. Russell Means and the American Indian Movement
5. Indian Genocide: the Red Stain on America's Honor
6. The Image of the Indian in American School History Books 1890 - 1970

During the remaining weeks of the semester the students submitted trial outlines, revised outlines, first drafts, and final draft more or less according to an agreed calendar. Allowances were made for problems involving change of topic,

change of approach, lack of access to certain resource materials, etc.

When the last paper was completed and the semester had come to an end, we realized we had begun to learn something about the American Indians. We had started from ground zero and had become moderately knowledgeable about ~~the~~ Indian history, culture, aspirations, arts, crafts, and contemporary problems.

We had also acquired a working knowledge of the whereabouts of resource information on the American Indian.

We had done a great deal of reading, talking, and writing about the Indians. Each student who performed his share of

work in the seminar had edited about 150 pages of his fellow students' writing, had done about 36 pages of critical comment on their essays, and had written approximately 60-70 pages of his own work.

We had no final exam. Instead I had a half-hour interview with each student during the final exam period. We discussed the student's performance on the investigative essay primarily and I asked each student for a comment on the weaknesses and strengths of the seminar. Here are some typical views:

"For the first time in my life I feel I really know how to use a library."

"What I learned was how hard it is to get accurate information about anything."

"The editing sessions were a drag. No one ever showed me how to write before."

"I hated having other kids tear my papers apart, but I think it helped me."

"Hey, was this really an English course? Sometimes I had a feeling you were putting something over on us."

"I'll tell you one thing, I'll never take the Indians for granted again. What a rip-off we gave them!"

Outcomes and summary:

I feel that the Freshman Investigative Seminar achieved the following outcomes:

1. It involved the students directly and meaningfully in the process of learning how to learn;

2. More specifically it gave them a sense of confidence and efficiency in using the library and keeping accurate records of their work;

3. It provided experience in oral discussion and information analysis;

4. It gave them experience in editing the work of their fellow-students and in writing, revising, and re-writing their own work;

5. It developed a healthy respect for the expressions of ideas based on the sifting and evaluating of information;

6. It gave the members of the seminar an informed insight into the complex culture of the American Indian and an awareness of the tough moral struggle that lies ahead in the confrontations between the Indians and the white society.

In conclusion, may I add that after two semesters of experience with the new program, the faculty of Upsala recently voted to eliminate the traditional Freshman Composition courses from the curriculum and substitute for them the

Freshman Investigative Seminar ~~approach~~ exclusively. The new approach is not only innovative, but it appeals to students, and, best of all, it works.